



Climate Change : Climate Solutions

Runways vs. Bike Lanes: Steering the World toward Sustainable Mobility

Go to some corners of the world, listen carefully and you might hear it. Particularly in the crowded, congested cities of the industrialized world, it is occasionally shouted from open windows and sidewalk cafes: "Get a smaller car!"



Valérie Bénard, European Mobility Week

"Interest in sustainable mobility is spreading internationally, beyond Europe."

It is a remark - no, a battle cry - directed at people who buy and drive the oversized and fuel-inefficient vehicles that some see as symbols of environmental shortsightedness and irresponsibility.

But the sustainable mobility movement is more than browbeating SUV owners. It is driven by a growing awareness that transportation and fuel-inefficiency are affecting the world's climate. Transportation - cars, airplanes, trains and ships - is responsible for a quarter of all human-related greenhouse gas emissions.

Working at all levels

Promoting sustainable mobility has many challenges. It involves influencing national and local policymaking, building public and consumer awareness, and suggesting viable and environmentally sound ways moving people and goods from one place to another.

"We have to work at all levels to achieve sustainable transport," says Jos Dings, director of the European Federation for Transport and Environment, an organization that focuses on various policy issues in Europe, particularly those related to fuel-efficiency and aviation. But convincing governments to support the development of fuel-efficient cars is only part of the effort.

"Sure, we should have more fuel-efficient cars, but if all cities are arranged like Houston (Texas), then a lot of that progress gets cancelled out," says Dings, referring to the wide-open urban sprawls that make cars almost indispensable.



Picture Gallery (click on the image to start)

Carbon offsetting companies promise to neutralize greenhouse gas emissions. Does it work? (Photo: Reuters)

Getting around town

The importance of city planning and public transportation is one of the ideas behind European Mobility Week. The annual event draws the participation of over 950 European cities and towns.

"The central aim of the project is to raise awareness among citizens that there are alternative ways to get around cities besides cars, such as cycling, walking, and public transport," says Valérie Bénard, one of the organizers of the event.

European Mobility Week is set to begin in mid-September, and will highlight the direct connections between mobility and climate change.

Citing successful initiatives in European cities, such as Copenhagen, Budapest, and the Croatian town of Koprivnica, Bénard says that many cities outside of Europe are also trying to promote sustainable mobility practices by installing more bicycle lanes, organizing car-sharing programs, and improving public transportation.

"Interest in sustainable mobility is spreading internationally, beyond Europe. There are now cities in Canada, Brazil, and Venezuela that are taking action, which is exciting for us," Bénard says.

A mismatch?

Some experts fear that developments, such as the rapid growth of commercial aviation, could plow roughshod over local, small-scale initiatives. Indeed, most observers agree the skies are becoming more cluttered with airplanes, and that the trend will continue.

In the face of alarming statistics like an 86-percent increase in greenhouse gas emissions from airplanes in Europe during 1990-2004, combating climate change with bike lanes and carpool programs seems like a mismatch of mythical proportions.

Expert projections for future growth of air traffic are equally alarming. One recent study at the Manchester Metropolitan University in the United Kingdom provided a variety of future scenarios, one of which suggested that carbon dioxide emissions from aviation could jump 10 times 1992 levels by the year 2050.

Another mode of transportation that makes a significant impact on global levels of emissions - but one frequently forgotten in public discourse - is seafaring transport.

"Everybody underestimates shipping," says Jos Dings. "It is responsible for more carbon dioxide emissions than aviation, and creates one-third the emissions of cars. You can't ignore it. Emissions can be easily reduced, yet nothing is being done."

"The future will not look like the present"

"The key is that there is not going to be one single, winner-take-all solution for transportation," says Mike Millikin of Green Car Congress, a

website that tracks technological and policy developments related to sustainable mobility.

Among current technological developments, Millikin cites hybrid cars, hydrogen fuel cells, and biofuels as possible ways to reduce fossil fuel consumption. He also suggests that the development of biotechnology and nanotechnology could lead to breakthroughs in power storage and fuel-efficiency.

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"The future will not look like the present, in which one solution (petroleum) is dominant," says Millikin. "There will be regional concentrations, based on available resources, as well as the technologies involved and developed."

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